First Congregational UCC
October 18, 2026
Member Testimonies

Adam Vandenberg:

Good morning, everyone, for those I haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet, my name is Adam Vandenberg. I come before you today to share a story with you all that had occurred about a month ago. I was on my way home from work, a very demanding day - not uncommon in the construction industry, when I was driving on highway 441 right where all the road construction is. I noticed a vehicle on the side of the road with most of the rear fender ripped off, and a tire that, well, isn't a tire anymore. I had surmised that the couple struggling must've hit something that had shredded their tire and damaged their vehicle. I wasn't looking to go out and do a good deed, I was simply going home, and someone had needed help. As I pull up to them, traffic is buzzing by, I toss a high vis vest to the man that was out in the road. He was struggling with the jack on the car, and in his defense, it was poor engineering because it wasn't one where you could just hook it in and turn it several times all at once, he could hook it, turn it a quarter turn and take it back out. A struggle to say the least.

I always keep some tools on me in case of an emergency because I used to be a mechanic, but I never have the whole toolbox with me. Ironically enough I had totally forgotten that a few weeks prior, I too had some issues on my car and it was stranded, and also ironically enough in this church's parking lot. Pastor Katherine and Nathan Birkholz can attest to this! So luckily enough, I had a 3-ton jack, socket set, and an impact. I was actually genuinely delighted to help! It made my day to be able to do this even though I was exhausted.

Something many of us take for granted was exactly what these wonderful people needed that day. What could have gone on to be an exhausting evening after work turned out to be me being in a great mood because I felt needed and was able to help someone in need- at just. the. right. time. Since coming back to the church after a 10-year hiatus, I have put complete and total faith in God's plan for me. I never doubt him. Now, I know that sounds crazy but if you sit with that thought and dissect it for a moment, it's really a weight lifted off of our shoulders. As our scripture says today between verses 8-11 we read that generosity can grow out of trusting Him to provide what we need. Now, don't get me wrong, helping someone on the highway and giving to the church are two different things, but both can come from the same desire to help and serve. Financial gifts help provide resources for our wonderful church to carry out our mission and serve the community we all live in. Consider what these gifts might make possible for someone who either needs support, or needs a

place to belong or feel loved, or if you're like me and want to grow your faith. Don't think of it as an obligation to give, think of it as a joyful opportunity to make this place continue to be wonderful, and bloom and grow our community more.

Sue Detienne:

Good morning, friends. My name is Sue Detienne. Our family joined First Congregational about 40 years ago. But my faith journey began long before that.

I grew up in a family that was active in a Presbyterian Church where my mother shared her natural leadership ability and love for books, and my dad shared his lifelong gifts of art and music. As a child and teenager, I was a regular in Sunday school, choirs, and youth fellowship. My husband Rick had grown up Methodist but we both drifted away from regular church attendance during college and our early years of marriage.

When we purchased our first home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, we looked for a church community—and, one week before our first child, Andy, was born we decided the little Methodist Church only two blocks from our house might be just right.

Andy surprised us in more than one way—he showed up almost 4 weeks early when Rick was on his last business trip before the baby was due—AND, Andy had Down syndrome.

The Christian author (and very funny lady) Anne Lamott is one of my favorites. She has several simple prayers—the first is "Help me, Help me, Help me"—and I used it a lot. In a new community with family more than 500 miles away, our first phone call after Andy's birth was to the young Methodist minister we had just met. What a remarkable blessing!! We fell into the warm embrace of a church that welcomed Andy and us with open arms and became our beloved extended family. Once when I asked Pastor Jim how to know the presence of God, he replied that he believed that one way God is known is through other people. Surely that has been our experience.

Our daughter was also born during the five years we lived in Cleveland. It was several geographic moves and churches later when we arrived at First Congregational in Appleton.

By that time, Andy's life was leading me to active advocacy for the needs of people with disabilities and, eventually, to a winding career path in the non-profit world. As our financial resources grew, we also had opportunities to support organizations we loved like United Way, SOAR Fox Cities, LEAVEN, and First Congregational—and the joy of seeing them thrive.

While I may not have the creative and leadership gifts my parents had, I've been able to participate in the life of this church in my own ways. One day I read a notice in the church bulletin that a family of modest means that was connected with First Congregational needed

someone to grocery shop weekly for them. I was working full-time for United Way, but I thought-I know how to grocery shop and this is something I have time to do. Elderly Joe and Juanita were neighbors of the church on E. South River and had been caregiving lovingly for their daughter Kathie since she experienced severe brain damage during surgery as a 1-year-old. Kathie was born 2 years after I was, but her development stopped at age 1. Until Joe and Juanita died 10 years after I met them, I was privileged to shop for them and learn from them. Who knew rabbit was a tasty dish? And Juanita taught me to use a handy dandy marking pen to put dates on perishables—I still do! Most importantly, I learned the depth of parental love and sacrifice—and to appreciate the special needs educational programming Andy benefited from but was never available to Kathie. I still remember this family every time I drive past their home on my way to Andy's condo or church.

I look at all the ways so many members of First Congregational are generous with their time, talents, and treasure—and I think about Anne Lamott's second prayer, "Thank you, thank you, thank you"-for welcoming our family, teaching us about trying to live a more Christ-like life, and giving us many opportunities to share. Finally, I remember that Lamott has a third prayer that describes God's grace as it is experienced at First Congregational. It is simply, "WOW!"

Susan Houston:

Good morning, I'm Susan Houston and I hope you are all aware that I am our congregation's vice-treasurer. Slated to become the treasurer next year. And what does a treasurer talk about?? pledging, money, budgets, etc. I even wore green. But I'm not going to talk about that stuff. So, you can all relax.

At one point in my career, I worked in financial reporting and had a discussion with a co-worker, Michael. He had gotten a new job, working for another organization, and was in the process of moving from Appleton to a home closer to the hallowed ground of Lambeau Field. And he would be joining a different church.

Michael told me that he would volunteer at his new church but not for anything financial – that was work. And I immediately understood where he was coming from. Many years ago, when I was a lot, lot younger, I was on a church's finance committee, I'd go to work, come home, and feel I was going back to work for committee and other financial meetings. Especially during budget time.

So, when I joined First Congregational in May of 2025, I was determined that I would follow Michael's example. I was an usher and on an ushering crew the Sunday I became a member.

I went through our church's activity guide.

Communion server – I can do that.

Wild Women Fellowship – with a name like that, I had to join.

Finance Committee – nope.

My downfall came when I saw Audit Committee. Auditing had been a big part of my career, and I thought, well, audits would occur only once every several years, they're short term, and can't be much work.

Then one Sunday, I asked Vince about joining the Audit Committee. Only to have him tell me – that the audit committee doesn't exist. That function is done by the Finance Committee – and by the way … would you like to join the Finance Committee, we need members.

I just thought to myself, (sigh) OK, Alright, OK, OK, I'll do it (sigh). So, I joined the finance committee.

Then about a year ago this time, I saw on the committee agenda an item – we need a Vice Treasurer. And I could picture when that agenda item came up, everyone turning and looking at me. So, I volunteered (sigh).

Now you may have picked up in what I have been saying a hint of reluctance. And I had to laugh when I found out what today's scripture reading would be. My translation of the Bible uses the word "reluctantly," not "regretfully."

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." I've never given regretfully, but reluctantly?...

And after I had read the scripture lesson 5 times and pondered it each time, I thought that the reluctant part really needs some sort of footnote, something to the effect that if you are a reluctant giver, give anyway.

We are growing. Our church, our community, our outreach needs from each and every one of us our pledges, our time, and our talents,

And you may find that even if you give reluctantly, you'll change, as I have changed regarding the finance committee, from a reluctant giver to a cheerful giver. I have witnessed the generosity of this congregation and the multitude of positive results firsthand. And it is simply amazing.

And by the way, some time ago I ran into my former co-worker, Michael. And found out that he is happily serving on his church's finance committee.

Thank you.